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Is willpower just another way of tying oneself to the mast?

Introduction: The claim

Odysseus was able to listen to the Sirens unharmed, even though their song was such that everybody else who had heard it before jumped off their ship and died in the sea. This episode is certainly one of Odysseus' finer achievements, but it seems very odd to say that it is one where Odysseus showed great strength of will. Odysseus manages to achieve his goal by having himself tied to the ship's mast by his sailors before they get close to the Sirens. The sailors then put wax in their ears and so are able to row the ship past the Sirens, because they cannot hear them. Odysseus can, but he can't give in to his desire to jump over board, because he is tied to the mast. Because he is tied, he cannot decide to give in to temptation. He is not free to do what he wants to do at the moment when he hears the Sirens, and therefore it makes little sense to praise him for his strength of will in this case.

Willpower does not seem to play a role in this particular scenario. Odysseus is clearly praiseworthy, because he is clever, because he is a good judge of his own mind, and he is capable of thinking of ways that will ensure that he will behave in the way that is best for his long term interest, even if the temptation to not do that is incredibly strong. But even though his cleverness has the same effect as an act of willpower, in so far as it allows him to withstand temptation, it seems obvious that it achieves that effect by fundamentally different means.¹

In fact, the Odysseus strategy is used to describe a whole class of self control strategies that achieve their control aim without apparently having to use willpower, i.e. so called tying to the mast strategies. If an agent uses willpower to withstand temptation, they use their capacities as agents to not be tempted, while tying to the mast strategies temporarily disable agency for the period in which one might be tempted. Willpower is about defeating temptation head on as an agent, tying oneself to the mast simply makes it impossible to give in to temptation, whatever the agent

¹ See Heath & Anderson 2010 for an argument to the effect that Odysseus should count as a case of willpower and Paglieri 2012 for an argument that uses the move discussed in the text to dismiss this.

would want to do at the time. The agent is simply not free to do otherwise in even the weakest and most uncontroversial sense of this term.²

I think this intuition is mistaken.³ *I think that there is no qualitative difference between the way tying to the mast strategies defeat temptation and the way someone defeats temptation by using willpower in the more standard sense.* I argue that this is because, if we understand willpower in the way that is most plausible (i.e. along the lines of Holton 2009, Baumeister 2008, for a brief explanation see section 1, below), then willpower operates in a way that is structurally identical to a tying to the mast strategy. *I argue that in both cases, the agent performs an intentional ‘tying to the mast action’ and the ties put in place by that action stop the agent from giving in to temptation.* The only difference between the specific tying to the mast strategy Odysseus uses and the use of standard will power, I argue, lies in the strength and durability of the ties that are put in place by the tying action. Obviously, they are extremely stable in the Odysseus case and they are relatively flimsy in the standard willpower case.

However, my main aim in making this claim is not to defend the radical position that the Odysseus case can be seen as a case of willpower, but to complete a far more mundane but probably more important task. The Odysseus case is interesting, because it is the prototype of a wide variety of ‘tying to the mast’ strategies using both mental (e.g. distractions) and non-mental ties. The main aim of this paper is to show that there cannot be a clear distinction between these strategies and ‘real’ willpower. This is an important task because we use these strategies all the time, and it is important to establish whether they are in some sense deficient or inferior to using willpower. It seems plausible to me that once my main point is accepted, that one can also accept that the Odysseus case is like willpower, but I discuss at various points in the paper potential ways of defending the intuition that it is not.

The argument:

1) What is willpower?

² I.e., she is not free to do otherwise, even if she had desired to do otherwise.

³ I have in earlier papers (2013, 2014) already developed a similar argument, but did not have space to fully discuss this argument there.

In order to get the argument off the ground, we first need to have an understanding of what willpower is supposed to be. Richard Holton has recently provided a very plausible account of how we should think about willpower, which I will take as my starting point (Holton 2009). Crucially, Holton holds that acts of willpower consist in intentional actions, rather than in deliberative exercises of practical rationality. On his picture, willpower works in the following way: At some point in time, an agent forms an intention to do something in the future, of which she knows that she might not want to do it at the time. She might for example form the intention to go for a run on Sunday morning on Saturday, but knows that she will not be very keen when Sunday morning comes along. Holton calls such intentions which the agent forms, despite knowing that her judgement may be in danger of shifting about them by the time they have to be implemented, “resolutions” (2009, p.9f).

Once an agent has formed a resolution, they can now use that resolution in the face of temptation in the following way: When the agent notices that she is tempted not to act in accordance with the resolution, she rehearses the reasons for not giving in to temptation and in that way strengthens her resolve. Crucially, however, this rehearsal is not an exercise of deliberation but instead an intentional action that actually prevents the agent from engaging in full-blown practical deliberation (2009, p.121f.). On the Holton picture, practical deliberation is undesirable in tempting situations, because if the agent were allowed to fully deliberate, they would come to the conclusion that they should give in to temptation. This is exactly what happens when an agent is weak willed. Weakness of the will is a consequence of too much deliberation under temptation. Thus, willpower on the Holton picture is necessary when our deliberative capacities are in danger of being corrupted by temptation (2009 chapters 5 & 6). It is not about preventing oneself from acting against one’s best judgement⁴, but about stopping the rational mind itself being corrupted. The rehearsal on this picture is therefore not a fully-fledged exercise in practical rationality, but rather a tool to prevent such an exercise. The agent rehearses in order to stop herself from deliberating, because deliberation would lead to a judgement shift that would rank giving in to temptation higher than pursuing the long term goal. Rehearsals feel

⁴ Holton reserves the term *akrasia* for cases of acting against one’s best judgment. Holton does not deny that *akrasia* exists as well, but he does not think that these are the cases that are in ordinary usage described as typical weakness of the will situations. Strength of will, then, is the ability to resist unwanted judgment shifts.

like a struggle, because the mind is constantly drawn to the now very salient reasons why one should give in to temptation.

But why should we think that this is the right account of willpower? Obviously there is no space within this essay to give a full defence of Holton's view. However, we can at least discuss Holton's two main reasons for holding this account. Both reasons seem so plausible that it seems worthwhile to explore the potential implications of his account. On the one hand, Holton points to the phenomenology of exercising willpower. Resisting temptation feels like a mental struggle, something we have to try to do again and again and we have only limited resources to keep up the fight. His account captures this intuition very well, but it seems that all accounts that rely on practical rationality rather than intentional action will struggle to explain that phenomenology. If willpower were simply about evaluating, why would it feel effortful? Either the agent evaluates that she should give in to temptation or she evaluates that her future goals are more valuable to her, but whichever way she decides it seems that there should be no need for any struggle after the evaluation. The agent will simply do what she thinks is best.⁵

Additionally, evaluations seem not to be the kind of thing that we can do intentionally anyway (Hieronimi, 2009) but effortful actions always seem to have an intentional component. So on the plausible assumption that the phenomenology of willpower clearly does contain a mental struggle, evaluative accounts will not be in a strong position to explain this phenomenology.

The second reason for holding his account ties in nicely with the first. It seems that the Holton picture fits the wealth of empirical data that have recently been accumulated from developmental and social psychology (2009, p.120). For example, Holton refers on the one hand to studies of delayed gratification tasks in developmental psychology (Mischel, 1996), where subjects are confronted with a choice between a small reward now (one cookie), or a large reward (two cookies) ten minutes later. In these studies, it could be shown that children perform much better when they engage in the kind of rehearsals that Holton talks about. More importantly

⁵ The only possible struggle here could be between what the agent wants and a motivational force that she is alienated from, but weak-willed actions are supposed to be fully-fledged actions by the agent, rather than compulsions where the agent cannot stand up to an irresistible psychological force outside the agent.

even, in social psychology, Baumeister (e.g. 2008) and colleagues have produced an impressive body of work that seems to indicate that there is a special faculty that humans use to achieve self control aims. The most prominent finding here is the phenomenon of ego depletion. Baumeister and colleagues could show that resisting temptation seems to require the usage of a mental resource that is strictly limited. Trying not to eat the cookies will affect the performance on an unrelated task that requires the same resource, like gripping a handle bar as hard as you can some time later. They could also show that it is possible to train this resource, leading them to the very intuitive metaphor of willpower as a mental muscle that can be trained and exhausted. Obviously, this work provides great empirical support for Holton's phenomenological observation that willpower is characterized by a mental struggle.

2) Why willpower is a tying to the mast strategy

Thus, Holton provides us with a story of how to think of willpower that seems eminently plausible. However, an unintended consequence of that story that I want to defend is that willpower on this account is nothing else than a tying to the mast strategy. This is because, according to Holton, in a willpower case the agent disables her rational evaluation capacities temporarily by rehearsing the argument in order to not give in to temptation. On my interpretation, this means that she disables her abilities as a mental agent for the time being. If that is right, then it is not the case that in contrast to the Odysseus case, agents using willpower fight temptations using their agentive powers, but instead they do exactly what the Greek hero did – they intentionally bind themselves to a (in their case mental) mast. The ties in this case consist in the rehearsal that makes it impossible for the agent to evaluate the situation neutrally.

This is the core of the argument, but a lot needs to be said to make it really clear and plausible. First of all, some clarifications are in order: Holton does acknowledge that our ordinary language use does not clearly distinguish between cases where the agent ties him- or herself to the mast mentally, by distracting him- or herself, and cases where the agent uses rehearsals. However, Holton believes that only the latter should be thought of as agent involving. Following on from this view, Holton legislates that only these cases should be thought of as “real” willpower (p.127, 2009).

Furthermore, my interpretation of Holton's story differs at a crucial point from his own. Holton argues that rehearsal is not arational (p.147, 2009), as I have claimed here. However, if the rehearsal is *not* arational, then it looks as if we can have our intentional action account of willpower and be mental agents at the same time. Holton's reason for saying that rehearsal is not arational is that, in contrast to an arational strategy, rehearsal does allow the agent to remain moderately reason-sensitive. If for example it turned out that on Sunday morning there was a snowstorm and it would be dangerous to go outside, then the agent would still be able to appreciate this danger, despite the fact that she had just got herself out of bed by rehearsing her reasons for going for a run. This is in marked contrast to the Odysseus scenario, where it would not help Odysseus at all if he recognized a couple of miles before the Sirens that his sailors were about to hit an underwater rock. His ties are truly arational and Odysseus would not be able to react flexibly to this new situation: If the ship sank, he would go down with it.

But even though this sounds very plausible, what is being said here is actually very unclear. The Odysseus case is slightly misleading, because it creates the impression that the crucial difference between a tying to the mast case and 'real' willpower is that a tied agent loses all agentive powers and becomes entirely passive, but most external ties are not like that.

Even a very moderate twist to the story can show that. Suppose the Sirens do not bring instant death but would nevertheless be able to overcome Odysseus' clear long term preference to get home to Penelope, and imagine also that Odysseus has his leg chained to the mast in order to avoid being able to fall for the siren's song, because even while listening to the Sirens he would still prefer having his leg to being with the Sirens. This set up seems relevantly parallel to the original story. Odysseus still manages to listen to the Sirens without endangering achieving his long term preferences, because even though the Sirens song will switch his preferences for the time that he hears it, he is not able to do something about it, because the only way that he could do something about it would entail doing something that he does not want to do (chopping off his leg), even while hearing the Sirens' song. But even though the scenario does look parallel in that respect, there is an interesting difference between the two: In this second scenario, if Odysseus sees that the ship will hit a rock, he does have the option to cut off his leg in order to avoid going down with the ship. Does that

mean that the chaining to the mast has now become an intentional action that preserves rationality and is perhaps even an act of willpower, because, in this scenario some agentive powers are clearly preserved? To argue this would be a very strange move for a defender of a position that emphasizes the difference between tying to the mast strategies and 'true' willpower. Odysseus is still passive with regard to the chain that stops him from jumping over board and presumably the defender of real willpower will say that this means that there is no willpower necessary at all, if the chains ensure that Odysseus is not tempted to jump, because he does not want to cut off his leg in order to be able to do so.

But if one accepts that this change to the story does not make the Odysseus case a case of willpower just because some reason responsiveness is preserved, then the example clearly shows that the mere fact that the agent is still reason responsive cannot be what distinguishes a rehearsal from a tying to the mast action. So the rehearsals must be special in a way that is more than just the fact that the agent stays reason responsive. In the next two sections we will look at potential ideas, which suggest what this specialness might be. We will examine whether rehearsals are special because they contain an element of struggle or whether they might be special because they help to confront temptation. What we will discover however is that there is no way in which rehearsals are fundamentally different from mental tying to the mast strategies like distractions. Once this core point is accepted it will become much less obvious that there could be a clear line between willpower and any tying to the mast strategy. Pushing this line as far as possible brings us back to the claim that there is no obvious clear line between even Odysseus cases and real willpower.

Objections

1) Where did all the struggle go?

One of the main reasons to endorse the Holton account was that it got the phenomenology of willpower right. As Holton points out, the exercise of willpower seems to be characterized by effortful intentional tryings to do the right thing, and Holton argued that the main rival accounts are not able to explain this phenomenology adequately. For the purposes of this paper, this was assumed to be correct. The paper then proceeded to argue that the intentional tryings in the exercise of willpower are

nothing else than tying to the mast strategies, which are structurally identical to the Odysseus scenario. But there seems to be a major problem lurking here. If tying to the mast strategies really are like willpower, then it seems that the struggle can't be an essential component of willpower. Think of e.g. the Odysseus case: Odysseus might struggle against his ties, but not because he wants to resist temptation, but because he desperately wants to give in to it. More generally, the very point of ties seems to be to take the need for a struggle away. So if willpower really consists in tying to the mast strategies, then the phenomenology of the struggle must be mistaken. This in turn seems to make the whole position unstable, because it was built on the assumption that Holton's account is plausible, but this plausibility in turn rests to a large degree on the plausibility of the phenomenology of struggle.⁶

Answering this very powerful objection will need some careful preparation: First of all, there should be a concession. The Odysseus case might be the archetypical tying to the mast scenario, but it is not the archetypical willpower scenario. However, this is not to concede that it is qualitatively different from 'true' willpower cases. The concession simply states that Odysseus is a limiting case of the huge variety of intentional strategies to control the mind.⁷ It is a limiting case, because the way the story is told, the control by the environment imposed in this case is maximally inflexible and installed long before the moment of temptation. In order to get a better picture of the claim, it is at this stage necessary to get a better idea of the strategies which have a much higher flexibility.

We have seen already that even relatively small tweaks to the story can make quite a difference to the intuition that tying to the mast strategies automatically disable all agency. Instead what they do is that they restructure the environment in such a way that the options for the agent are systematically changed in such a way that the desired option is the one that will most likely be the most attractive one for the agent. Still, in the tying to the mast case discussed, it is still the case that the chain is very durable, the cost of getting out of it is very high, and most importantly, the chain is clearly outside Odysseus' head. Because of all of these factors all defenders of a deep gap

⁶ Thanks to Mike Ridge for pointing this worry out to me.

⁷ For a discussion of the different varieties of intentional strategies to control the mind see Vierkant 2012a, 2012b.

will probably be very confident that my second scenario is not a case of willpower either. All the above scenario could demonstrate was that the difference between ‘tying to the mast’ scenarios and true willpower cannot consist in the mere fact that a tied agent is not at all able to act on reasons. Odysseus with his leg tied is clearly able to act, but equally clearly the intuition that this situation is not one where he needs to use willpower remains unchanged from the scenario where he is fully chained to the mast.

But all of the conditions which make these cases seem so different from real willpower cases are not present for all tying to the mast scenarios. Tying to the mast actions can create flimsy ties, breakable at a relatively low cost, and they can happen entirely inside one’s head.

Think for example of distraction cases. An agent trying to lose weight might have formed the resolution not to eat too much at the lunch buffet, but when the time comes and he is standing next to the buffet, he is very tempted by the lovely cakes on display. Now, in order to not give into temptation, he might try to engage a colleague into a discussion about some departmental gossip, because he knows that this will take his mind off the tempting cakes. Even better, if no colleague is at hand, then the agent could simply look the other way and try to work out a tricky objection to his paper. In these cases, the agent again does something intentional (chatting to the colleague, turning away, concentrating on the puzzle) that brings it about that the agent does not give into temptation. This is achieved by focusing the attention of the agent on something else. Now, according to Holton, such cases are clear tying to the mast cases, rather than instances of true willpower, because the agent uses the intentional action to avoid temptation, rather than in order to confront it.⁸

But note that in such cases, quite a few things are different from the Odysseus case. If the building were to burn down, then it seems not impossible for the agent to abandon the conversation or the objection and to leave the building. In these cases, this does not even come at a very high cost. Even more importantly, the gossip might not be that interesting and the objection not that pressing, so that it might take the agent quite a lot of cognitive effort to keep concentrating on it. In these cases, the

⁸ For a very similar argument see Paglieri (2012).

phenomenology of effort will be very plausible. The less successful the distraction, the more effort it will take to maintain it.

The upshot of this obviously is that effort and tying to the mast strategies are not mutually exclusive. That being established, it is now quite easy to explain why Holton's observation about the phenomenology of willpower is at least compatible with the idea that willpower is nothing more than a tying to the mast strategy. This can be done either in a conciliatory, or a more hard nosed, approach. On the soft line, the argument would be to accept that Odysseus is not about willpower, because a struggle is a necessary condition for willpower, but to maintain that willpower and distraction-like cases are simply a sub-class of effortful intentional self control. The only difference between them and Odysseus like cases is that they happen in tempting situations. On the hard line, one could deny that Holton's phenomenology argument requires us to accept that willpower always involves struggle. Instead, Holton's argument would still work, if it were the case that it *typically* involves a struggle. As all the distraction cases⁹ fulfil the struggle condition, it would then be possible to be hard nosed and to claim that Odysseus-like cases are simply untypical cases of real willpower. Either option can maintain the bulk of the argument, but as the soft option seems slightly ad hoc, we shall proceed here assuming the hard nosed reply and claim that Odysseus is a – albeit limiting – case of willpower.

2) Confronting and avoiding temptation

From the discussion in the last paragraph, it should have become clear that tying to the mast strategies very often can involve a struggle in the face of temptation, but does this really fully lay to rest the worry that they are not qualitatively different from real willpower? One might e.g. object that even if it is true that tying to the mast strategies can require effort in the face of temptation, they are still fundamentally different from real willpower, because the effort is used to achieve fundamentally different things. In the distraction cases, the effort is used to achieve the goal of

⁹ Note that it will not do here to claim that the qualitative difference between tying to the mast cases and willpower-type cases is the difference between goings on inside or outside the head. The ties in distraction cases (TV, book, etc.) are very often outside the head, but seem to have exactly the same function as the rehearsal.

diverting attention away from temptation, thereby making agential control less arduous. Part of the control effort is taken away from the agent and loaded on to the environment. In true willpower cases, on the other hand, the effort is used to confront temptation, but with a mindset that does not allow re-evaluation. In other words, it does not look as if the agent in these cases relinquishes any control. In fact the very opposite seems to be the case: The agent puts her evaluative system, as it were, on a short leash and that allows her to confront temptation without being corrupted by it.

Again this seems very intuitive and we will need to construct another distraction case to see what is wrong with it. Suppose our agent at the lunch buffet does not avert his attention from the buffet, but instead he stares right at a small bit of jelly on one of the sandwiches which he finds disgusting in order to curb his desire to give in to temptation, or he sets himself the job of arranging the mini pies in such a way that they could represent the proposition of the objection that he wants to think about. What these examples show is that it is entirely unclear what exactly is meant by the idea that someone is confronting temptation. Our agent in this scenario clearly is orientated toward the buffet and has his full concentration on it. On the other hand, he equally clearly isn't thinking of the buffet as a temptation that he has to resist, but manages by means of a lot of cognitive work to transform it into something disgusting or a puzzle. This seems parallel to the rehearsal case. It is true that in one sense the agent confronts temptation head on, by repeating his reasons for not giving in to it. But this is very much only one side of the coin. The crucial aspect of the rehearsal, as Holton states himself, is the thought that it will prevent the reopening of a real deliberation of the merits of not giving in to temptation. This is nothing else than an avoidance strategy. The agent does not confront temptation in its full force and reason with it. The very point of willpower according to Holton is that the agent is worried about being corrupted and stops that slide by avoiding letting himself fully appreciate the force of temptation.¹⁰

¹⁰ One might ask here whether there could not be cases where the agent is aware that his long term goal is worth more to him, but needs rehearsals to not be swept away by a brute motivational force that he does not agree with. One might think that in such cases rehearsal does contribute to deliberation. Cases like that do exist, but they are a) not cases of willpower on the Holton definition, because there is no judgment shift and b) even more importantly, even in these cases the rehearsal does not contribute to

The general point being established, it is time now for a clarification that amounts to a small concession. I have shown that rehearsal cases are indirect in the same way that distraction cases are indirect. What I have not shown, however, is that distraction and rehearsal are always the same thing – but that they are two different variations on the same theme. What is more, there is a very simple explanation for why Holton thinks that rehearsals but not distraction cases are real willpower: Rehearsals on average seem to be harder. It is intuitively very plausible that rehearsing your reasons for not giving in to temptation is harder than simply averting attention and this intuition is also borne out by the empirical evidence. In the developmental evidence that Holton discusses, children found it much easier to distract themselves from the cookies than to repeat the reasons for not eating the cookie (Mischel, 1996). In addition, there are also fascinating studies with chimps that show that chimps can use distraction techniques in order to master delayed gratification tasks, but find it impossible to simply stare down temptation, as it were (Evans & Beran, 2007). Thus, it seems empirically plausible that rehearsals are more difficult than the employment of some distraction strategies. However, all this shows is that some distraction strategies do require less cognitive strain than rehearsals, presumably because they are more like looking away from the buffet rather than trying to transform the buffet into a puzzle. The ties in such cases are more durable, because the tempting stimulus is simply removed rather than transformed. ¹¹

3) Tying and being tied

So far I have tried to establish that the rehearsal strategy is nothing else than a distraction strategy. This is already an important result, but it invites a possible argument against my overall claim that willpower is nothing else than a tying to the mast strategy. The sceptic could concede that it is right that distraction cases and rehearsal cases are structurally identical, but insist that all that this shows is that even

deliberation, but simply makes sure that the outcome of the deliberative process is what the agent will do. Thanks to Rob Rupert for raising this worry.

¹¹ This leads to an empirical prediction against the Holton account. If Holton is right, then strategies like transforming the buffet into a puzzle should not deplete the mental muscle, as they are not real willpower. On my account, however, the prediction is that they will, because the effort is explained exclusively by maintaining the ties.

in rehearsals, not the whole process is about willpower. She could accept that even in such cases, the effect of the mental ties achieved by the rehearsal are not part of the exercise of willpower, but simply a consequence of it – and if that were the case, then the same could be said about distraction cases. Bringing about the distraction can be willpower, but being distracted cannot be. This has the advantage that willpower seems to again reside purely in an intentional action, and seems to be much more closely linked to the exercise of agential powers. It seems right as well with regard to the phenomenology of struggle: It seems right that averting attention from the tempting stimulus in order to achieve distraction is hard, but once attention is on something else, no more real work is done by the agent until attention for whatever reason is drawn back to the tempting stimulus.¹²

This seems very powerful, but again we have to carefully unpack what is being said in order to evaluate the force of the objection. First of all, it should be emphasized again that this is already a very important concession. It allows that intentional actions that have the purpose of achieving the avoidance of temptation count as willpower. This is the stated aim of this paper, so the concession admits defeat on the main point of contention that there is no qualitative difference between willpower and tying to the mast actions. Without further qualifications this would even allow that Odysseus' action of tying himself to the mast is willpower, even if the tied stage is not part of the exercise of the capacity. In order to rule out such cases, we need not only accept that the action of distracting oneself counts as willpower, but also an extra condition on what willpower is. The obvious candidate here could be that willpower requires that the intentional action takes place in the tempting situation itself and not beforehand. This move would clearly exclude the Odysseus case. But even with this condition in place, it is still not obvious that willpower can consist only in the tying stage.

To see why, we need to think about rehearsal again. The idea is that rehearsing the reasons for not giving in to temptation might have the effect that we do not reconsider in situations where this reconsideration is likely to go wrong. But why do we not reconsider in such situations? At a very general level, presumably because the rehearsal has some effect on our psychology – i.e., it is the psychological effect of the

¹² Thanks to Marcel Brass for raising this worry.

rehearsal that brings about the desired result. So what is the potential difference between rehearsals and distractions? If anything, it presumably is the effect these actions have on the system. In fact, the struggle will be a function of the effect. Rehearsals could have long lasting or short-term effects. The effects could be stronger and weaker, they could be specific or unspecific, they could be additive or not. But if it is the case that the character of an act of willpower is systematically dependent on the effect it has on a cognitive system, then it becomes quite ad hoc to claim that willpower consists only in the act but not in the effect it is having.

So it seems that willpower, on this more subtle picture, is a complicated interaction between the tying and the tied up part of the mind. But if this is the right way to think about willpower, then it is just not possible to have a deeper understanding of willpower if we do not examine the nature of the ties, as well as the act of tying – and this in turn means that the final objection to this account fails. Willpower, whether it comes as a rehearsal or a distraction, is willpower because it is an intentional action that has a self-control effect, and if we want to understand a specific act of willpower, then we will have to examine the ties as well as the tying.¹³

4) System One and System Two

Before we can wrap up there is one more important worry that needs to be discussed. Holton argues that an exercise of practical rationality should not feel like a struggle, but to readers of Baumeister, this may seem surprising. Baumeister thinks in the two systems terminology¹⁴ and conscious deliberation according to him is a System 2

¹³ The same goes for a related distinction: It might be claimed that the real dividing line is between ties that disrupt deliberation (rehearsal and distraction) and ties that disrupt acting on the consequences of flawed deliberation (both Odysseus scenarios). Thanks to Rob Rupert for raising this issue. But even here, it is not clear that we can uphold the distinction. Distraction might normally occur during deliberation, but it is also works after a judgment shift has occurred.

¹⁴ The two systems approach is a very popular way in current psychology to divide the mind into two different systems. System one is characterized as a fast, parallel, unconscious and involuntary system, while system two is supposed to be slow, serial, conscious and voluntary. For an overview see e.g. Evans 2003. For a skeptical perspective see e.g. Keren, G. & Schul, Y. (2009).

activity and hence effortful.¹⁵ This seems worrying for the Holton account, because if practical deliberation is always effortful, it looks as if one of the main reasons for rejecting a deliberative account of willpower does not work any more.¹⁶ The phenomenology of struggle is explained by the fact that rational deliberation is a system 2 activity.

There is a very short answer here, but it points to a very deep problem. The short answer is that Baumeister simply employs the term ‘deliberation’ differently. On the Holton account, deliberation is simply evaluative activity, whereas on the Baumeister account, deliberation is a specific psychological process. Deliberation on the Baumeister account contains evaluative episodes, but it also contains a large amount of what Galen Strawson (2003) calls ‘shepherding actions’. These are intentional actions like focusing, concentrating, rehearsing, etc. that support evaluative processes. So the answer to the worry is that we simply have to be clear that it is the Holton use of deliberation as evaluation that we are concerned with here, and that therefore the Baumeister account of deliberation is simply off topic.¹⁷

Wrapping up and consequences of the view:

Intuitively, willpower and trying to the mast strategies are two very different ways of achieving self control, but on a closer look it turns out that the two strategies are not

¹⁵ But from here, it looks as if a worry about Holton’s account could be constructed. Perhaps whether something is a struggle has less to do with the question of whether it is an intentional action, but whether it is system 1 or system 2 controlled. An argument like this has in fact been put forward by Neil Levy for cases of weakness of the will (2011). Levy argues that strength of will is not a specific faculty (as Holton would have it), but simply requires system 2 resources. Holton is aware of Levy (see page 134) and does not think that this is a problem for him. He is simply happy to accept that strength of will is probably a system 2 phenomenon, and doubts whether it is clear that Levy has a strong argument that it is not a specific faculty within this system.

¹⁶ Thanks to Robin Scaife for pointing out this worry.

¹⁷ There is a more interesting question lurking here though. If conscious deliberation in system 2 is effortful, then perhaps the question discussed here about the role of intentional actions for willpower is only the tip of the iceberg of a much wider question about the nature of practical rationality and the role of intentional action in it in general. I very much suspect that this is the case, but this clearly falls outside the scope of this paper.

really different at all. Instead what we find is that tying to the mast strategies vary greatly with regard to the strength and durability of the ties employed.

It was then proposed that willpower simply is a tying to the mast strategy, but one that employs relatively weak and flexible ties. Like all tying to the mast strategies, willpower restructures the cognitive environment in such a way that evaluations under temptation are much more likely to go the way that the agent desires them to go. One obvious interesting question here is whether this view has consequences: One might e.g. worry that it provides a disincentive to train the mental muscle that Baumeister and colleagues discovered. If it does not make a difference whether I tie myself to the mast or whether I challenge temptation with the power of the will, why bother going through all the effort of training the muscle? But this would be a complete misinterpretation of the claim advanced here. The claim defended is not that there is no mental muscle, but that the mental muscle is nothing else than a way of achieving self control by employing very weak and short-lived ties. If this is right, then the main different empirical prediction to Holton has to be that it might well be possible to find e.g. distraction strategies that lead to a similar level of ego depletion as Holton's rehearsals. This should be the case exactly when the strength and durability of the distraction has the same weak restructuring effect of the cognitive environment as the rehearsal would have.

The lesson from Odysseus is not that we do not need willpower, but that it operates in a less mysterious way than previously thought. This must be good news not only for people who are interested in the nature of willpower, but also for everyone who could do with being able to employ it a bit more effectively – and there might be quite a few of those...

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